THE WASHINGTON POST 4/4/95

Gingrich Shifts on Gays in Military

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House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) shifted his position Sunday when he endorsed a return to the military's old policy of banning open homosexuals from the armed services.

In 1993, Gingrich, then Republican whip, voted against maintaining the ban and said that asking recruits about their sexual orientation intruded "radically too far" into private behavior.

Lauren Sims, a spokeswoman for Gingrich, told the Associated Press that the speaker took his latest stance after hearing military officers complain that homosexuality "was not consistent with the military lifestyle. . . . The speaker was bowing to the judgment of the experts."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff support the Clinton administration's "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy, but privately Gingrich said that many high-ranking officers do not. Last week, a federal judge in New York ruled the policy unconstitutional.

Gingrich, appearing Sunday on ABC's "This Week with David Brinkley," predicted that the Republican-controlled Congress would reconsider the policy and would "probably go back to the rules that existed prior to President Clinton changing them."

But House National Security Committee Chairman Floyd Spence (R-S.C.) said he has not discussed the subject with Gingrich and has no hearings planned on the current policy on gays in the military. "I think he's probably thinking the Supreme Court won't rule the right way," Spence said. "If it's not upheld, Congress will probably get back into it."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.) agreed with Spence, telling the AP: "I believe we should allow time for the judicial system to confirm the constitutionality of the policy."

Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), one of three openly homosexual House members, suggested that Gingrich was trying to appease hard-line conservatives after setbacks on term limits, a balanced budget amendment and abortion. "I think this was generated not by the military but by internal Republican politics," Frank said. "I think he thinks a little gratuitous gay-bashing will keep the right wing in line."

A gay rights group, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, pointed out that Gingrich voted Sept. 28, 1993, against a GOP amendment that would have allowed the military to resume asking recruits whether they were gay or bisexual. The Democratic-controlled House defeated the amendment, 291 to 144. Before that vote, Gingrich stated his "very strong opposition" to the amendment and said that asking recruits about their sexual orientation "strikes me as radically too far, unnecessary and inappropriate."

Gingrich told reporters yesterday that a move to restore the ban would be handled through the annual defense authorization bill, which usually goes to the floor for consideration in June or July.

Administration policy allows homosexuals to serve in the military but requires them to keep their sexual orientation private. The policy also prohibits interviewers from asking recruits about the subject.